

Yizkor
Shavuot 5777

*God full of compassion
who dwells on high
grant perfect rest
under the wings of the Shekhinah
to the soul of my loved one...*

The words of this medieval prayer are so familiar to us. They are the translation of the *el male rachamim*, chanted at every Ashkenazi funeral, during every Yizkor service and, traditionally, when reading the Torah during the week of a person's *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of their death.

There's a mystery at the heart of this prayer, as at the heart of so many others.

When we mention the wings of the *Shekhinah*, I wonder what we each of us perceives. Perhaps those of us who learn visually see a figure, maybe a female figure, or some kind of play of light and darkness. Those of us who first experience the world as sound might hear a rustling, or the timbre of an otherworldly wind. Those of us who are tactile might experience a sense of being enfolded, or sheltered.

Whichever way, I suspect that we perceive *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* as being above us, in some way, rather than 'down here.'

This is because that word *kanfei* tends to be translated as 'wings.' In the creation narrative, birds are described as *of kanaf* - winged birds. We read elsewhere in the Tanakh of the wings of storks, eagles, doves. And supernatural creatures in the Tanakh are also winged. The cherubim - who, far from being adorably chubby little baby-figures, are more like those fearsome winged, crowned lion-headed creatures we sometimes see in museums - have at least one pair of wings each. The serafim - the burning beings who fly around God's throne room in Isaiah's vision - have three pairs each.

And so, when we think of *kanfei ha-Shekhinah*, we might be envisaging at least one pair of wings. And that fits with the next part of the prayer - *be-ma'alot kedoshim u'tehorim* - in the purest heights of holiness - to which, one assumes, one can only arrive with the help of wings.

But *kanaf* has other meanings. In fact, one of them is literally under our noses right now. In the third paragraph of the Shema, we say *venatnu al tzitzit ha-kanaf p'til tkhelet* - they shall put in the fringe on the *kanaf* - the corner of the garment - a blue thread. In this sense *kanaf* is more like a cloak or a shawl - a garment that is intended to enfold and protect the wearer.

At midnight on the threshing floor, Ruth says to Boaz:

Ani rut amatkha - I am Ruth, your handmaiden

ufarasta knafekha al amatka - Spread your garment over your handmaiden

ki goel ata - for you are a redeemer

Rather than imagining wings, we might imagine that the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* create a sudden rush of warmth, similar to the warmth that comes from a person opening up their coat and wrapping us into it.

To whom does this coat belong? What, or who, is this *Shekhinah*?

We tend to think of the *Shekhinah* as feminine, because Kabbalah teaches that She is the feminine part of God, God's consort, with whom the masculine part of God unites on Shabbat. But before She became Her, as it were, the *Shekhinah* was the part of God that lived 'down here,' the indwelling, immanent presence of God among us. The Mishkan - same word! - the tabernacle in the desert, housed the *Shekhinah*, as did the Holy of Holies in the Temple. And when the Jewish people went into exile, the *Shekhinah* was exiled too, and wanders the earth with us, resting when we rest, standing at the head of the sickbed, watching silently as we put on tallit and tefillin.

So I think the *El Male Rachamim* may not only be about the person we lost, love and miss. On the one hand, we are asking God to shelter the soul of our beloved under God's wings, somewhere on high. But on the other, the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* are down here, with us.

And since we know it for a truth that part of those we love remains 'down here,' where we are, it must follow that the comfort that comes from *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* is a comfort that we, also, seek. Even as we envisage some higher realm in which their souls are protected, we seek the presence of the *Shekhinah* here, in this building, in this room.

Because the proper domain of the *Shekhinah* is with humanity. In the Talmud [Sanhedrin 46a] Rabbi Meir teaches:

When a human being suffers, the *Shekhinah* says - oh, my head is hurting! My heart is hurting!

When we are in pain, the *Shekhinah* is in pain. When we weep, She weeps also.

And now we can understand how it all fits together. If *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* - the garment of *Shekhinah* - enfolds us down here as well as 'up there,' it must follow that as each of us stands here remembering our grief, we can also represent the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* for each other. In the same way as the prayer can be understood as referring to both *Shekhinah* above and *Shekhinah* below, it can be understood as referring to an external *Shekhinah* - God's presence moving between us in this room - and also to the image of God in which we ourselves are formed, and which is indwelling in each of us.

And so *kanfei ha-Shekhinah* enfold us on all sides - above, below, to the right and to the left, outside us and within us.

As we remember those who no longer walk with us in this life, let us gather together under the *kanfei ha-Shekhinah*. As we listen to the prayer, let us truly hear its reverberations and feel its power.

Let us pray that our loved ones find shelter above
Let us pray that we find comfort below.

May the memory of those we lost be blessed
May we be blessed
and may we bless each other
tahat kanfei ha-Shekhinah and let us say, Amen.

